

# Literary creativity and political debate. The case of African journals *Mensagem* and *Notícias do Imbondeiro*

Noemi Alfieri

CHAM, FCSH, Universidade NOVA de Lisboa, Lisboa, Portugal.

Email: noemialfieri@fcsch.unl.pt

ORCID: 0000-0002-0914-273X

## Abstract

This contribution aims at elaborating on the ties between creativity, intended as the ability to create new meanings through literature, and politics, in the Angolan literary sphere of the 1960s. The dispute between *Mensagem* of Casa dos Estudantes do Império and *Notícias do Imbondeiro* went way beyond literary debate. Though centred primarily on current literary production and dissemination, both publications engaged in a heated debate on activism and anti-colonial struggle. Contradictions became thereof apparent.

At the time, what was at stake was, in fact, a struggle on the part of a cultural elite on how to combine theoretical thought grounded in Africa, artistic creation (notably through the multiple representations of African imaginary), whilst setting an agenda for the boundaries of activism.

The arguments of Carlos Ervedosa and Leonel Cosme, representing the two editorial projects and their contrasting positions, as much as the ones of Alfredo Margarido - who anonymously wrote essays on the *Boletim* of C.E.I. -, constitute in this paper a point of departure for the understanding of the cultural background of the Angolan and Portuguese 60s, their contradictions and ambivalences.

**Keywords:** Africa, Journals, literature, representations, nationalisms.

If, as Claude Prévost stated, the borders of literature are imprecise, the strength of this statement becomes even more intense in case we try to apply it to the context of the African and Angolan literature of the 1960s. At that time, the bond of literature with ideology ended up being quite omnipresent on the African literary debate, as much as it became impossible to escape from it, even for those who, like the editors of *Imbondeiro*, were making huge efforts to do it. The fight for the African independences after World War II and the deterioration of Salazar's Portuguese regime led, since the very beginning of the 1960s, to an exacerbation of the social and cultural conflicts. 1961 was the year in which the first attacks to the Portuguese colonial regime were struck by the movements for the Independence of Angola, such as UNITA, MPLA and FLNA, at the time defined by the colonial administration as terrorist associations. As a response, Salazar decided to engage in a war that would only finish with the Carnation Revolution of April 25<sup>th</sup>, 1974.

In this context, under censorship and facing growing repression by the political police, PIDE, artistic creation and human intelligence were often used to express, through fiction and literary creation at large, feelings and thoughts that would otherwise be forbidden. As Inocência Mata (2015) stated, literature played a fundamental role in the national awareness of the former Portuguese colonies. In Lisbon, the *Casa dos Estudantes do Império* (C.E.I.), an association born in 1945 under the control of *Mocidade Portuguesa*, the section of

the Portuguese regime dedicated to cultural initiatives for children and young students, had become a relevant cultural hub. Several young African intellectuals, who were in Lisbon to get the academic education that was not available in the colonies, became aware of the need of cultural change and political opposition and created the *Centro de Estudos Africanos* (Centre of African Studies). *Mensagem*, the bulletin of C.E.I., soon became a tool of dissemination of the nationalist, anti-colonialist and anti-fascist values the new generation of Africans were inspired by. The tight collaboration with the French review *Présence Africaine*, thanks to Mário Pinto de Andrade, also favoured the contacts with the Négritude ideals and their main representatives. The 1960s were, for *Mensagem*, the years of the establishment and definition of a literary canon (Martinho, 2015). During those same years, a new project was born in Sá da Bandeira (now Lubango), under the direction of Leonel Cosme and Garibaldi de Andrade. Its name was *Imbondeiro*.

Being involved in the project as both editors and writers, the two intellectuals promoted a considerable impact in the literary culture written in Portuguese. They edited poems, anthologies of poetry and short stories, didactical books and novels until they were forced to interrupt their activities because of the intervention of P.I.D.E., in 1964. Gerald Moser compared the impact of the closure of *Imbondeiro* to the scandal related to the award of the prize «Grande Prémio Novelística», of

the SPE<sup>1</sup>, to *Luuanda* by Luandino Vieira, and the subsequent scandal that followed (1966, p.486). The *Imbondeiro* editorial project ended up producing nine collections: *Colecção Imbondeiro* (68 issues), *Livros de bolso Imbondeiro*, *Contos d'África*, *Novos Contos d'África*, *Mákua* (anthology of poetry in Portuguese or translated into Portuguese), *Dendela* (short stories for children), *Colecção Primavera* (didactical books), *Imbondeiro Gigante* and *Círculo* (short stories, 1967, under the direction of Garibaldi de Andrade and Orlando de Albuquerque).

As much as they were trying to set aside the political debate, empowering some of the literary works they were publishing to break the borders of fiction - thanks to the clear connections of narrated facts to real events -, the editors of Sá da Bandeira ended up being involved in a debate with C.E.I., challenging the borders between the political and the literary spheres.

## 1. The interview of 1960 to Carlos Ervedosa: matters of nationality and representation

In 1962, an important debate started after the dissemination of an interview given by Carlos Ervedosa and published in issues 3/4 of *Mensagem* by C.E.I., of March – April 1960. The main discussion was around the cultural relevance of Angolan literary movements and intellectuals with a particular focus on the metropolitan *Mensagem*. In his interview, Ervedosa ignored the activities of *Imbondeiro* and chose to just refer to *Mensagem* (from Angola) and *Cultura*.

Commenting on the birth of the anthologies and collections edited by C.E.I., Ervedosa considered them a natural consequence of the “ultramarinização da Casa”<sup>2</sup>. As the representative of the Editorial Board (*Secção Editorial*) he underlined that most of the literary movements that had started in Angola – the country he felt most familiar to – were including, because of the

lack of an enlightened criticism, “uma série de literatos e artistas «angolanos» que, na maioria dos casos, nem ao menos de lá são naturais”<sup>3</sup>.

At first reading, the comment of Ervedosa, born in Luanda but of Portuguese descent, seemed to exclude from the category of Angolan people those who were born in Portugal. While explaining which were the guiding criteria of the two anthologies edited by C.E.I., he stated that as an editor he had just tried to be honest; he had selected the works “without prejudices of race, colour, religion or any other nature”.

Accordingly, he stated that Angolan intellectuals were

todos os brancos, negros ou mestiços, naturais ou não de Angola, black or mestiços, natural or not of Angola, que numa simbiose natural das duas culturas em contacto, a europeia e a africana, se irmanam nos mesmos problemas e aspirações, no mesmo amor à terra e às suas gentes, na mesma autenticidade e no mesmo anseio de construção duma sociedade cada vez mais perfeita.<sup>4</sup>

Going deeply into the matter of “natural symbiosis”, the author implicitly made a distinction between the concept of luso-tropicalist cultural assimilation and what he considered a truly multiracial society. The *Négritude* and *Présence Africaine* are the two main points of departure and evaluation criteria of the Angolan case. The subsequent declarations of Cosme (1978) are clear as to these differences:

Onde está o parêntese fechado e os “presencistas africanos” escreveram “africana”, “Imbondeiro” teria escrito “angolana”, pensando em termos possíveis de uma originalidade euro-africana. Isto é, admitindo que Angola poderia vir a constituir uma comunidade “sui generis”, não seguindo a visão segregativa e paternalista que o Estado colonial-fascista recolhera do luso-tropicalismo e Gilberto Freyre, nem com as barreiras originais que o próprio Diop julgava existirem na real impossibilidade de o autêntico “mundo africano” assimilar o ser assimilado pelo “mundo europeu”<sup>5</sup>.

Both positions evoke the formation of a New Man

African originality. That is, by admitting that Angola could constitute a *sui generis* community, not following the segregationist and paternalistic vision that the colonial-fascist state collected from luso-tropicalism and Gilberto Freire, or Diop’s take on the impossibility of “African world assimilating or being assimilated by the “European world”».

Alouine Diop, Senegalese writer and editor was the founder, in Paris (1947), of the journal *Présence Africaine*, the first giving voice, on a larger scale, to Africa and its intellectuals, becoming the privileged dissemination tool of the *négritudinist* ideals. Some of the authors represented in it are Richard Wright and Léopold Sédar Senghor. Mário Pinto de Andrade also had an active role in the direction and in 1953 the famous article “Les étudiants noirs parlent” was published.

1 Sociedade Portuguesa de Escritores, the Portuguese Writers’ Association.

2 Literary, the “overseazation” of C.E.I.

3 As for all the next quotes in this article, I provide a free translation to English: “a series of «Angolan» literates and artists that, in most of the cases, were nor even born there”.

4 “all the whites, black or mestiços, natural or not of Angola, that in a natural symbiosis of the two cultures in contact, the European and the African, become like brothers in the same problems and aspirations, in the same love to the land and its people, in the same authenticity and in the same yearning of construction of an increasingly perfect society.”

5 «Where there is a closed parenthesis and the “African presencists” wrote “African”, “Imbondeiro” they should write “Angolan”, thinking on possible terms of a Euro-

and the need of cultural renovation, but the perspectives and the ways of building the national and identity project rely on two definitions that seemed to be, at least at that point, hardly consensual: the Afro-European and the Euro-African identities.

Some discrepancies between the interviewer Tomás Medeiros and the interviewed Carlos Ervedosa would also seem to be raised from the written statement published in *Mensagem*. As Medeiros stated his doubts about the possibility that white man could identify himself with the black man beyond a sentiment of brotherhood, the opinion of the Saotomean intellectual ended up clashing with the one of Ervedosa.

Ervedosa's thesis raised doubts; how can the white man interpret the problems of a black man properly? The best examples of this possibility of identification would have been expressed by white writers like Castro Sormenho and António Jacinto. Poems like "Castigo p'ro comboio malandro" (A.A.V.V., 1960) by António Jacinto went beyond social representation. The depiction of the daily reality of an overcrowded train going to Luanda is associated to the idea of resistance of black people to exploitation, in a poetic *crescendo* that turns the claim for justice more and more explicit. The use of native languages and expressions illustrates a stylistic choice that is as well a clear form of affirmation and active Africanization of the Portuguese language. The aspect of the literary activism, though, should not lead us to ignore, or to underestimate, the process of this poetic creation. The poem creates and follows a dense plot, a sort of screenplay that leads the reader into the future, that is, to the moment when the train, possibly representing colonisation, will derail. This time, they will face the refusal of collaboration from Africans.

This kind of disagreements in the arguments of Ervedosa and Medeiros testify that the influence of Senghor's thesis and Négritude among the students of C.E.I., as much as the prominent role of *Présence Africaine*, cannot be denied. Its interpretation and reception between the African independentists, however, was never linear.

Even if the negritudinis' theses had become leading references in this context, their adjustment to the case of Portuguese colonialism was never consensual. Starting from the conference of Senghor in Lisbon in the facilities of C.E.I., in 1956 (A.A.V.V., 2015), there were people who, as David Bernardino and Ivo Lóio, expressed their doubts about the confluences of the speech of the Senegalese intellectual with the Salazarist orientation. This was due to the mystification of lusotropicalism and to the implicit justification and valorisation of the cultural assimilation that, long before that date, already entered the imaginary

even of the progressive faction of the Portuguese society.

Going back to Ervedosa and the debate with Cosme, he decided not to include *Imbondeiro* in the list of the movements that, in his opinion, had given a relevant contribution to the renovation of Angolan writing. He may have thought the works published by *Imbondeiro* did not fit the canon of black literature committed to the fight against the Portuguese colonialism. The political orientation of the editors, furthermore, seemed to be oriented towards a progressive autonomy of the colonies, rather than to independence, as some letters written by Garibaldi de Andrade intercepted by PIDE clearly suggest.

With regards to the other colonies, the movements that are highlighted are *Claridade* for Cape Verde and the journals *Itinerário*, *Notícias* and *Brado Africano* for Mozambique (together with its editors, the Albasini brothers, and the writers Noémia de Sousa, Rui de Noronha and José Craveirinha). In this context, we should not be surprised by the fact that the work of Cosme and Garibaldi de Andrade was excluded from the comments of the responsible of the Cultural Department of C.E.I.

*Imbondeiro* did not match the standards of Angolanity established by C.E.I., or the ones of Négritude. Furthermore, we cannot forget that as the interview was published in March/April of 1960, the issues of *Colecção Imbondeiro* that were already available in the bookshelves to be sold were a short story by Garibaldi de Andrade (*O tesouro*), one by Leonel Cosme (*Graciano*) and, possibly, *Filha de Branco* by Lília da Fonseca. All the references made by Ervedosa to movements that, he thought, had promoted the emergence of new values, were referring to literature produced before the very year of 1960.

## 2. 1962: the rise of the debate between C.E.I. and *Imbondeiro*

In 1962, Cosme would go back to this discussion in an article that was originally published in the first issue of the *Boletim da Câmara Municipal de Sá da Bandeira* and then republished in *Notícias de Imbondeiro*, nº 30, March 1962.

We are referring to two distinct ways of conceiving the raising identity and the relationship between literature and the world. C.E.I. was trying to run away from the constraints that the bond with the Portuguese regime implied (we recall that the *Casa* was born under the auspices of Marcello Caetano and the *Mocidade Portuguesa*). *Imbondeiro* was seeking, on the other hand, to achieve an increased involvement in the local reality. The editor was also trying to empower their connections with the local administration, aiming to promote an increasing cultural development of the province and hoping for notoriety in the Metrópole.

By presenting his defence of *Imbondeiro* as an Angolan literary movement, the writer and editor underlined the strength of the editorial programme: for the first time, he stated, Angolan authors were published on a large scale, with a large diffusion in Angola and the Metrópole, whilst the organisation of the project could bring beneficial impact to Angolan literature (Furtado, 2005).

*Imbondeiro* aimed at (always in Cosme's words) dealing with the cultural dissemination, without any discomfort or constraints due to ideological bonds and without questioning the race or colour of its writers, "com a intenção de divulgar valores sem lhes perguntar a identidade"<sup>6</sup>. These assertions thus seem to strengthen the idea that *Imbondeiro* tried to escape any ideological or political compromise, not disavowing from disseminating books or works that were representing any clear "values". They were aware that it was impossible to run away from the central questions of the Angolan life: the presence of the Portuguese in Angola, the conditions of the indigenous people, the policies of assimilation and the cultural differences.

The explicit mention to the lack of questioning over "identity" *lato sensu* also reflects an effort of critical distance from both the negritudist movements (from which it was excluded because of the ethnicity of its authors) and the movements that used the political activism as a flag.

Concerning the 68 short stories that were published in the collection edited by *Imbondeiro* between 1960 and 1964, their heterogeneous content and origin were in line with the dubious political stance of their editors. Aggregated by the powerful symbol of baobab, literary production from all over the Portuguese-speaking world was reunited as representative of the Angolan production. In this particular case, we should consider the editorial project as a whole, as the project itself has both a literary and political meaning. The choice of identifying as "Angolan" the production of writers coming from Angola, Brasil, Cape Verde, but also Portugal and Alentejo (see the series "Seis contistas alentejanos") is relevant and aims to have its own meaning. Edições *Imbondeiro* is one of the cases in which, in order to try to escape both the censorship and some political debates considered problematic, the editors decided to – somehow – hide behind their collection. Cosme and De Andrade tried in different ways to be as silent as possible, while short stories like "Filha de Branco" by Lília da Fonseca, "As calças" by Carlos Sanches, or "Cigarros Sujos", by Henrique Abranches would carry a strong and clear political message. Thinking about the last

case, the claim for dignity and equal treatment from an Angolan worker refusing a cigarette his white *capataz* would give him if he had begged for it is constructed by Abranches with high loyalty to the feelings of the exploited man. By publishing this short story, the editors in Sá da Bandeira could take position through literary creation and without having to speak for themselves. What makes the very case of *Imbondeiro* more complex and problematic is the inclusion of some texts that matched the colonial production and that were collaborating in the consolidation of the myth of the civilizational mission of Portugal in Africa. We can take as an example, "Amor por correspondência ou "O prestígio das letras pátrias" by Joaquim Paço d' Arcos. A young Angolan girl, in the colonial society, spends her time dreaming of becoming a poet and of visiting the *Metrópole*. She starts by writing letters to the correspondent of a journal in Lisbon she falls in love with. Even if the short story will end with a big disillusion for the young girl, already in Lisbon, the impression the short story has on the reader is that some aspirations, like poetry writing, could not be easily accomplished in a place like Angola. Only Lisbon might be the only possible stage for such aspirations and romantic dreams on the part of a young white woman.

Soon after Cosme's declaration on the literary project, he was leading with Garibaldi, C.E.I. responded. Under the title «Imbondeiro, Mensagem, Cultura e a Coleção de Autores Ultramarinos», an apocryphal article defined and clarified once again the opposition to *Imbondeiro* for what concerned its general orientation, practices and objectives. Thanks to the book *Estudos sobre literaturas africanas das nações de língua portuguesa*, we now know the author of the essay was Alfredo Margarido.

Defending himself from the accusation moved by Cosme of "saudosismo", nostalgia, of the movement of the Angolan *Mensagem* and *Cultura*, the author defines the movement as the first form of awareness "that was born in Angola in the last fifty years", that aimed to discover Angola against foreign values that had nothing to do with "the Angolan humanity".

The differences between C.E.I. and *Imbondeiro* are underlined in a harsh tone. The editor of Sá da Bandeira is accused of relying on "série de lugares comuns falhos da realidade"<sup>7</sup> as he was accusing *Mensagem*, *Cultura* and the *Coleção de Autores Ultramarinos* of focusing mostly on a sociological framework rather than on a creative, humanistic approach.

Convinced of the need of condemnation of

6 "with the intention of spreading values without asking them for their identity."

7 "a series of commonplaces flawed from reality."

*Imbondeiro's* politic of inclusion of authors who had nothing to do with Angola, like Paço d' Arcos, Cândido da Velha e Eduardo Teófilo, Margarido concludes that the two publications, despite having the same purpose, showed deep divergences in what concerns the achievement of their particular goals. While *Mensagem* refused the "purely literary", *Imbondeiro* stated its main aspiration was to be a big repository of ideas, a co-op of writers more than a collective publication. They aimed to bypass the political affiliation and the identification with the opposition already haunting the publishing house because of the fame of Cosme in the province. All the moral, social and political responsibilities were transferred to the contents of the works and their authors:

Não, senhores, IMBONDEIRO não está divorciado das realidades angolanas, do homem angolano. Mas IMBONDEIRO é apenas um movimento editorial angolano - e é angolano porque atendeu a manifestações de cultura angolana (cultura que se processa em Angola, mas podendo ser semelhante à que se processa em Paris), seja ela meramente parnasiana, seja activista. IMBONDEIRO só deseja ser uma cooperativa de escritores e nunca - mais modestamente do que a C.E.I. - uma consciência. Não discute, portanto, o que convém ao homem angolano. Os seus autores sim; a máquina editorial, não.<sup>8</sup> (Cosme, 1978, p. 46)

The position Cosme decided to turn explicit, besides its lack of correspondence to a *posteriori* narration and reconstruction of the facts as he did in books and articles, ended up excluding *Imbondeiro* from the Angolan literary canon. This was based on the refusal of the editors of associating to their literary project an ideological and political project, of explicit activism. This very project was deeply rooted in the idea of reconstruction of an anti-fascist Angolan nation, free from Portuguese colonialism. The lack of an active and interventionist attitude of the editors with regards to the political situation of the territory led to their progressive oblivion and partial neglect after the independence of Angola in 1975.

### 3. Linearity, mimicry and ambivalences: the borders of creativity

Another – founded – criticism was brought forward to the *Imbondeiro* project and then widely replicated in anthologies and critical essays of the '70s and '80s (by Carlos Ervedosa and José Carlos Venâncio, in particular): it was about the inclusion of non-Angolan writers in its *corpus*. Referring to

the relevant Angolan literary movements of the 1960s, defined by Venâncio (1987) as "um período quase silenciado", that is, a nearly silenced period, *Imbondeiro* is the only mentioned initiative apart from *Mensagem*. The author underlines the lack of an ideological orientation and the fact they also published the work of writers that weren't Angolan natives, but he enhances their contribution to the "cause of angolanity".

Considering this and other statements about *Imbondeiro* implies a deep reflection about the critical space that opened (or not) to a real questioning of the purposes, of the theoretical and methodological contradictions of this project. Whether we share the view of the editors or not, *Imbondeiro* published, disseminated and publicised the work of many established Angolan writers. Most, but not all of them, had already been published by C.E.I., but were still benefitting from the promotion and distribution of one more editorial project. *Imbondeiro* had a wide distribution network, not just in Angola, but also in several Portuguese cities, where *Colecção Imbondeiro* was printed, as well as in Cape Verde, Brasil, Mozambique.

One may consider the editorial choices in *Imbondeiro* arguable, and they do not even comply with the "Propósitos" expressed in its first volume. It is, however, relevant to revisit the issue as to understand the social and cultural dynamics that engaged colonial society and that had a clear reflection on literary production.

*Mensagem* and the Cultural Section of C.E.I., on the other hand, were in general deeply convinced of the need to create a militant literature that could actively and publicly support the nationalists' struggles in Africa. This commitment was responsible – together with the undeniable literary quality of the poems, short stories and essays published in the journal – for the popularity of the journal. It led, on the other side, to increased attention and repression by the political police and it eventually culminated in the closure of C.E.I. in 1965.

Both journals were forced to interrupt their literary activities, but their literary archive kept on circulating, demonstrating that the imagination and artistic depiction of nationalist aspirations though repressed by the regime, kept an enduring place and historical relevance.

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<sup>8</sup> "No, Sirs, IMBONDEIRO is not divorced from the Angolan realities, from the Angolan man. But IMBONDEIRO is just an Angolan editorial movement – and it is Angolan because it attended manifestations of the Angolan culture (culture processed in Angola, but that could be similar to the one

processed in Paris), whether it's merely Parnassian, or activist. IMBONDEIRO just desires to be a co-op of writers and never – more modestly than C.E.I. – a conscience. It doesn't discuss, therefore, what suits the Angolan man. Its authors do, the editorial machine doesn't."

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